Rectorship Address

The Self-Assertion of the German University

27 May 1933

Assuming the rectorship means committing oneself to leading this university *spiritually.*[1] The teacher and student body under the rector's leadership will awaken and gain strength only by being truly and collectively rooted in the essence of the German university. This essence will only attain clarity, rank, and power, however, when the leaders themselves are first and foremost, and at all times, led by the inexorability of that spiritual mission which impresses onto the fate of the German people the stamp of their history.

This translation is based on a previous version by William S. Lewis in *The Heidegger Controversy,* ed. Richard Wolin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 29–39. I have made minor corrections and altered some phrasings.

Bracketed numbers refer to the pagination of GA 16; the chapter opens at page 107.—Tr.

1. [The words *Geist* and *geistig* will be rendered here by "spirit" and "spiritual," respectively, though the German has further connotations of mind or intellect.—Tr.]

Do we know of this spiritual mission? Whether yes or no, the question remains unavoidable: *Are* we, the teachers and students of this advanced school, truly and collectively rooted in the essence of the German university? Does this essence truly have the power to shape our existence? It does, but only if we fundamentally *will* this essence. But who would wish to doubt this? One generally takes the predominant, essential character of the university to reside in its "self-governance"; this shall be preserved. But have we also fully considered what this claim to the right of self-governance demands of us?

After all, self-governance means: to set ourselves the task and to determine the way and means of realizing in order thus to be what we ourselves ought to be. But do we know *who we ourselves are,* this body of teachers and students at the highest school of the German people? *Can* we know this at all, without the harshest and most constant *self-reflection*?

Neither knowledge of the conditions that prevail today at the university, nor even familiarity with its earlier history, guarantee sufficient knowledge of the essence of the university—unless we first delimit, clearly and uncompromisingly, this essence for the future, *will* it in such self-limitation, and in this willing *assert* ourselves.

[108] Self-governance can exist only on the basis of self-reflection. Self-reflection, however, only occurs in the strength of the self-assertion of the German university. Will we carry this out, and how?

The self-assertion of the German university is the original, common will to its essence. We regard the German university as the advanced school which from science and through science[2] educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians [*Führer und Hüter*] of the fate of the German people. The will to the essence of the German university is the will to science as the will to the historical, spiritual mission of the German people as a people that knows itself in its state [*Staat*]. Science and German fate must come to power at *the same time* in the will to essence. And they will do this then and *only* then when we—the teachers and students—*on the one hand* expose science to its innermost necessity, and *on the other,* when we stand firm toward German fate in its urgent distress.

Yet we will not experience the essence of science in its innermost necessity as long as we—in speaking of the "new concept of science"—simply provide for the independence and presuppositionlessness of an all-

2. [I will use "science" throughout to translate *Wissenschaft,* though this clearly lacks the breadth of the German term.—Tr.]

too-contemporary science. This activity, which merely negates and scarcely looks back beyond the last decades, will gradually appear as a true effort to understand the essence of science.

If we wish to grasp the essence of science; then we must first ask ourselves the decisive question: Should science still continue to *exist* for us in the future, or ought we to let it drift off to a quick end? It has never been unconditionally necessary that science should exist. But if science should exist, and if it should exist *for* us and *through* us, then under what conditions can it truly exist?

Only when we submit to the power of the *beginning* of our spiritual-historical existence. This beginning is the onset of Greek philosophy. That is when, [109] from the culture of one people and by the power of that people's language, Western humans rise up for the first time against *beings as a whole* and question them and comprehend them as the beings that they are. All science is philosophy, whether it knows it and wills it or not. All science remains bound to that beginning of philosophy and draws from it the strength of its essence, provided that it still remains equal to this beginning.

Here we want to recover for *our* existence two distinguishing characteristics of the original Greek essence of science.

There circulated among the Greeks an old report that Prometheus had been the first philosopher. Aeschylus has this Prometheus speak an adage that expresses the essence of knowledge:

τέχνη δ'ἀνάγκης ἀσθενεστέρα μακρῷ

"But knowledge is far less powerful than necessity." That means: All knowledge of things remains beforehand at the mercy of overpowering fate and fails before it.

For precisely this reason, knowledge must develop its highest defiance, for which alone the entire might of the concealedness of beings will first rise up, in order really to fail. Thus beings reveal themselves in their unfathomable inalterability and confer their truth on knowledge. This adage about the creative impotence of knowledge is a saying of the Greeks, in whom we all too easily see the model for knowledge that is purely self-reliant and thus lost to the world; this knowledge is presented to us as the "theoretical" attitude. But what is θεωρία for the Greek? It is said that it is pure contemplation that remains bound only to its object in its fullness and its demands. The Greeks are invoked to support the claim that this contemplative behavior is supposed to occur for its own sake. But this claim is incorrect. For on the one hand, "theory" does not happen for its own sake, but

rather out of the passion to remain close to beings [110] as such and to be beset by them. On the other hand, however, the Greeks struggled precisely to understand and carry out this contemplative questioning as a—indeed as *the*—highest mode of ἐνέργεια, of humans' "being-at-work." It was not their wish to bring practice into line with theory, but conversely to understand theory as the supreme realization of genuine practice. For the Greeks, science is not a "cultural treasure," but the innermost determining center of their entire existence as a people and a state. Science, for them, is also not merely the means of making the unconscious conscious, but instead the force that keeps all of existence in focus and embraces it.

Science is the questioning that stands firm in the midst of beings as a whole as they continually conceal themselves. This active perseverance knows of its impotence in the face of fate.

That is the essence of science in its beginning. But does this beginning not already lie two and a half thousand years behind us? Has human progress not changed science as well? Certainly! The subsequent Christian-theological interpretation of the world, as well as the later mathematical-technical thinking of modernity, have removed science from its beginnings both temporally and with regard to its objects. But that by no means relegates the beginning itself to the past, let alone destroys it. For, assuming that the original Greek science is something great, then the *beginning* of this great thing remains its *greatest* moment. The essence of science could not even be emptied and used up—which it is today, all results and "international organizations" notwithstanding—if the greatness of the beginning did not *still* exist. The beginning still *exists.* It does not lie *behind* us as something long past, but rather stands *before* us. As the greatest moment, the beginning has in advance already passed over all that is to come and thus over us as well. The beginning has invaded our future; it stands there as the distant injunction that orders us to recapture its greatness.

Only if and when we resolutely obey [111] this decree in order to win back the greatness of the beginning will science become the innermost necessity of our existence. Otherwise, science will remain something in which we become involved purely by chance or will remain the calm, pleasurable comfort of an activity free of danger, which promotes the mere advancement of factual knowledge.

If, however, we obey the distant decree of the beginning, then science must become the fundamental event [*Grundgeschehnis*] of our spiritual existence as a people.

And if our ownmost existence [*Dasein*] itself stands on the threshold of

a great transformation; if it is true what the last German philosopher to passionately seek God, Friedrich Nietzsche, said: "God is dead"; if we must take seriously this abandonment of today's human in the midst of beings: how does it stand with science?

Then the Greeks' initially wondering perseverance in the face of beings will be transformed into a completely unsheltered exposure to what is concealed and uncertain—that is, what is worthy of question. Questioning will then no longer simply be the surmountable, preliminary stage to the answer as knowledge, but questioning will instead itself become the highest form of knowledge. Questioning will then unfold its most proper power for disclosing the essence of all things. Questioning will then force us to radically simplify our gaze toward what is inescapable.

Such questioning will shatter the encapsulation of the various fields of knowledge into separate disciplines, return them from their scattering into boundless and aimless isolated fields and niches, and directly expose science once again to the fruitfulness and blessing of all the world-shaping forces of humans' historical existence, such as: nature, history, language; the people, custom, the state; poetry, thought, belief; sickness, madness, death; law, economy, technology.

If we will the essence of science in the sense of *the questioning, unsheltered standing-firm in the midst of the uncertainty of beings as a whole,* then *this* will to the essence will create for our people the world of its innermost and most extreme danger, i.e., its [112] truly *spiritual* world [*wahrhaft* geistige *Welt*]. For "spirit" is neither simply empty acumen, nor the noncommittal play of wit, nor the busy practice of never-ending rational analysis, nor even world-spirit [*Weltgeist*]. Rather, spirit is the originally attuned and knowing, determined resolve toward the essence of Being. And the *spiritual world* of a people is not its cultural superstructure—just as little as it is its arsenal of useful knowledge and values. Instead, it is the power of deeply preserving the forces that are rooted in the people's soil and blood; the power to arouse most inwardly and to shake most extensively our people's existence [*Dasein*]. A spiritual world alone will guarantee our people greatness. For it will transform the constant decision between the will to greatness and the toleration of decline into the law that establishes the pace for the march upon which our people has embarked on the way to its future history.

If we want *this* essence of science, then the teachers of the university must really advance to the outermost dangerous position of uncertainty concerning the world. If they stand firm there, i.e., if from there—in the essential, afflicting proximity to all things—there arises for them a common

questioning and a commonly attuned discourse, then they will become strong enough to lead. For what is decisive in leading is not merely advancement but the strength to go alone, not out of obstinacy or the desire to dominate [*Herrschgelüste*], but by virtue of the most profound destiny and the broadest obligation. Such strength binds to what is essential, singles out the best, and awakens the genuine following of those who have new courage. But we do not need to first awaken such a following. The German students are on the march. And they seek *those* leaders through whom they intend to elevate their own destiny to a grounded, knowing truth and place it in the clarity of the interpretive-effective word and deed.

A will to the essence of the university comes out of German students' resolve to stand firm in the face of the extreme distress of German fate. This will is [113] a true will, insofar as the German students, through the new Student Law,[3] place themselves under the law of their essence and thereby first delimit this essence. To give the law to oneself is the highest freedom. The much-praised "academic freedom" is being banished from the German university because this freedom was false, as it was only negating.[4] It mostly meant lack of concern, arbitrariness in one's intentions and inclinations, lack of restraint in everything one does. The German student's notion of freedom is now being returned to its truth. The bonds and the service of German students will develop out of this freedom.

The first bond is the one that binds to the national community [*Volksgemeinschaft*]. It obligates one to share cooperatively in the toil, the striving, and the abilities of all classes and members of the nation. This bond will henceforth be secured and rooted in student life through *labor service.*

The *second* bond is the one that binds to the honor and the destiny of the nation in the midst of other peoples. It demands the preparedness, secured in knowledge and ability and firmed up through discipline, to follow one's duty to the end. This bond will in the future embrace and pervade all of student life in the form of *military service.*

The *third* bond is the one that binds students to the spiritual mission of the German people. This people shapes its fate by placing its history into the openness of the overpowering might of all the world-shaping forces of human existence, and by capturing its spiritual world ever anew. Thus exposed to the extreme questionableness of its own existence, this people

3. [This law, which went into effect on 1 May 1933, aimed at aligning universities with National Socialist goals by establishing leadership hierarchies among students.—Tr.]

4. [See Heidegger's comment on this sentence in supplement 1, p. 315.—Tr.]

has the will to be a spiritual people [*geistiges Volk*]. It demands of itself and for itself, and of its leaders and guardians, the harshest clarity that comes from the highest, broadest, and richest knowledge. A youth of students that ventures early into manhood and spreads its will over the destiny of the nation compels itself to thoroughly serve this knowledge. They will no longer permit *knowledge service* [Wissensdienst] to be the dull, quick training for a "distinguished" profession. [114] Since the statesman and the teacher, the doctor and the judge, the pastor and the master-builder lead the people in its existence and watch over this existence in its essential relations to the world-shaping forces of human Being and keep it focused, these professions and the education toward them are entrusted to the knowledge service. Knowledge does not serve the professions, but the other way around: The professions realize and administer the people's highest and most essential knowledge, that of its entire existence. But for us this knowledge is not the calm taking-note of essences and values in themselves; rather, it is the placing of one's existence [*Dasein*] in the most acute danger in the midst of overpowering beings. The questionableness of Being in general compels the people to work and struggle and forces it into its state, to which the professions belong.

The three bonds—*through* the people *to* the destiny of the state *in* its spiritual mission—are equiprimordial aspects of the German essence. The three forms of service that follow from them—labor service, military service, knowledge service—are equally necessary and of equal rank.

Cooperative knowledge about the people, knowledge of the destiny of the state that holds itself in readiness, and these together with the knowledge of the spiritual mission first create the original and full essence of science—the realization of which has been given us as our task—assuming that we obey what the beginning of our spiritual-historical existence [*Dasein*] decreed in the distant past.

It is *this* science that is meant when the essence of the German university is defined as the advanced school that, from science and through science, educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians of the fate of the German people.

This primordial concept of knowledge does not just commit one to "objectivity" but, first of all, to essential and simple questioning amidst the historical-spiritual world of the people. Indeed, it is only from here that objectivity can establish itself, i.e., find its character and limits.

[115] Science in this sense must become the force that shapes the body of the German university. This implies two things: First, the teachers and

students must each in their own way be *seized* by the idea of science and *remain* seized by it. At the same time, however, this concept of science must penetrate into and transform the basic forms in which the teachers and students collectively pursue their respective scholarly activities: It must transform from within the *faculties* and the *disciplines.*

The faculty will only be a faculty if it develops into a capacity for spiritual legislation [*geistiger Gesetzgebung*] that is rooted in the essence of that faculty's particular science, so that it can give shape to the forces of existence that beset *it* and fit them into the *one* spiritual world of the people.

The discipline will only be a discipline if it places itself from the very outset within the realm of this spiritual legislation, thereby bringing down disciplinary barriers and overcoming the musty and false character of higher education as superficial professional training.

At the moment when the faculties and disciplines get the essential and simple questions of their existence underway, the teachers and students will already be in the embrace of the *same* ultimate necessities and afflictions attendant to existence [*Dasein*] as a people and a state.

Giving form to the original essence of science, however, demands such a degree of rigorousness, responsibility, and superior patience that by comparison, for example, the conscientious observance or the zealous modification of fixed ways of doing things hardly matters.

If, however, the Greeks needed three centuries just to put the *question* of what knowledge is on proper footing and on a secure path, then *we* certainly cannot think that the elucidation and unfolding of the essence of the German university can occur in the present or coming semester.

But there is, to be sure, *one thing* that we do know which follows from the essence of science as indicated above, and that is that the German university can only attain form [116] and power when the three forms of service—labor service, military service, and knowledge service—come together primordially into *one* formative force.

That is to say, the teachers' will to essence must awaken to the simplicity and breadth of the knowledge of the essence of science and grow strong. The students' will to essence must force itself upwards into the highest clarity and discipline of knowledge, and must incorporate in a demanding and determining way the cooperative knowledge about the people and its state. Both wills must prepare themselves for mutual struggle [*Kampf*]. All capacities of will and thought, all strengths of the heart, and all capabilities of the body must be developed *through* struggle, must be intensified *in* struggle, and must remain preserved *as* struggle.

We choose the knowing struggle [*wissenden Kampf*] of those who question, and declare with Carl von Clausewitz: "I renounce the foolish hope for salvation by the hand of chance."

The community of teachers and students in struggle will, however, only transform the German university into the site of spiritual legislation and realize it in a concentrated center for the highest service to the people in its state if the teachers and students arrange their existence to be simpler, tougher, and more modest in its needs than that of all other comrades [*Volksgenossen*]. All leadership must allow its following to have its own strength. All following carries resistance [*Widerstand*] within it. This essential opposition between leading and following must neither be covered over nor, indeed, obliterated altogether.

Struggle alone will keep this opposition open and implant within the entire body of teachers and students that fundamental mood [*Grundstimmung*] out of which self-limiting self-assertion will empower resolute self-reflection to true self-governance.

Do we will the essence of the German university, or do we not will it? It is up to us whether and how extensively we endeavor, wholeheartedly and [117] not just casually, to bring about self-reflection and self-assertion, or whether we—with the best intentions—merely alter the old arrangements and add some new ones. No one will prevent us from doing this.

But neither will anyone ask us whether we will it or not when the spiritual strength of the West fails and the West starts to come apart at the seams—when this expended, illusory culture collapses into itself, pulling all forces into confusion and allowing them to suffocate in madness.

Whether such a thing does or does not occur depends solely on whether we as a historical-spiritual people will ourselves, still and again, or whether we will ourselves no longer. Each individual *has a part* in deciding this, even if, and precisely if, he evades this decision.

But it is our will that our people fulfill its historical mission.

We will ourselves. For the young and youngest power of the people, which is already reaching beyond us, *has* already *decided* this.

We can only fully understand the glory and greatness of this new beginning, however, if we carry within ourselves that deep and broad thoughtfulness upon which the ancient wisdom of the Greeks drew in uttering the words:

τὰ . . . μεγάλα πάντα ἐπισφαλῆ . . .

"All that is great stands in the storm . . ." (Plato, *Republic* 497d9)